

## An Upside Down World John 13:1-17

Everyone expected Jesus would turn the world upside down – at least they expected that the Messiah would turn the world upside down. And as far as we can tell, the disciples who gathered in this Upper Room have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that he will turn the world on its head. They live in a world of oppression by the government, where Rome has its boot on the neck of the nation, threatening violence if they get out of line. They live in a world where religious leaders layer one level of law after another onto the shoulders of hurting people, concerned more with legal propriety than healing and salvation. Over and over in John, we have seen people helped and healed, only to have people in power question whether it was right, or done rightly. They live in a world where the vast majority of the population has no hope and little future. After three years of traveling with Jesus, listening to him and watching, they believed that he had come to turn the world upside down. He had come to overthrow the oppressive government and kick them out. He had come to put the religious leaders in their place, to teach them the truth, and free the people from the burden. He had come to give people hope – ordinary people, people who had no future and no resources, people who were on the outside, people who couldn't catch a break. He came so that the first would be last and the last would be first.

And they were right – that is what he came to do and we expect the same of Jesus today. To turn things that are wrong upside down. Christians are working all over the world to turn injustice and oppression and hopelessness upside down. They provide water to communities that have nothing but an unpredictable well; they provide education to children that have no future. They stand up to oppressive governments to recognize the human dignity of their people. They provide medicine and medical care to restore human life. There was a story on the news this week about a condition that affects two million women in the developing world, obstetric fistula. It comes during childbirth, and the woman who has it becomes confined to her home as a social outcast. A young woman, trapped at home and isolated from society for the rest of her life. And the solution? A simple, \$700 surgery. A group of doctors from Great Britain have gone to Uganda to offer surgery free of charge to as many women as they can while they are there. *And the effort has been organized by Christian missionaries.* This is the sort of thing we expect Jesus Christ to do. When Christ is present in the world, when the love of Christ is motivating men and women, we expect the world to be turned upside down. We expect the lonely to find companionship. We expect the grieving to be comforted. We expect the hungry to be fed. We the naked to be clothed. We expect the broken to be made whole.

But how? How does this happen? Where does it start and how does it work? The disciples who gathered in that Upper Room surely believed it would start with power and revolution. Everything we know about the expectations of the Messiah in that world is that when the Messiah came, he would lead a revolutionary army to overthrow the oppressor and

re-establish the nation. The Messiah would be cut from the same cloth as the great King David, who defeated his enemies and ruled his people with wisdom and prosperity. This is what the disciples expected of Jesus on that night in the Upper Room. And then he turned *their world upside down*.

Imagine walking down a road in ancient Palestine. You are wearing a loose tunic, and leather sandals on your feet. The sandals are open, and the road is dirt and dust. If you walk a mile, your feet are covered in dust. If you walk two miles, they are caked in dust. If you walk all day, the dust is hard on your feet. When a person entered a home for an evening meal, ordinarily the person would wash their feet. It was by far the dirtiest part of the body. This is not so remote from our experience. If you spend a day out gardening in sandals, or walking in sandals through an amusement park or in a city, what is one of the first things you do when you come in? Perhaps take a bath – at least wash your feet. If a person arrived at the home of a friend for a special meal, there would usually be a servant to wash their feet. It was a lowly job to say the least. If I were to ask for a show of hands, “How many of you don’t mind washing someone else’s feet?”, not many hands would go up. I’m sure of it. It’s a menial job. When the disciples entered the Upper Room there was no servant to wash their feet, and they neglected to do it themselves. So as the food was being served, Jesus got up and took off his tunic. He tied a towel around his waist, took the bowl and pitcher from the side table, and knelt down to wash his disciples’ feet.

One by one, he knelt at their feet. Taking each foot, one at a time, he placed it carefully in the basin and washed. He cradled each disciple’s foot in the towel and washed it until it was clean. Twelve disciples, twenty four feet. By the time he came to Simon Peter, Peter was shocked and disturbed. “Lord, are you going to wash my feet! ... You will never wash my feet!” This is not at all what Peter expected his Messiah and Lord to do. It was inappropriate, it was beneath him, and it was demeaning. But Jesus insisted. “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” This was Jesus’ way. And if Peter rejected it, he rejected Jesus. It was upside down to everything they expected. It was upside down to everything anyone expected of a person who would lead in power and majesty. Yet this was Jesus’ way. And here, Jesus reveals to us *how* he turns the world upside down. By simple and shocking humility, by self-sacrificing love. Why was it so shocking last year when Pope Francis washed and kissed the feet of dozen inmates at a detention center in Rome? Because for all of us, Christian and non-Christians, it seemed so beneath the Pope. Ordinarily the Pope washes the feet of priests—that’s what we expect. Not inmates in a detention center. Yet, when the Pope knelt before 12 inmates, it was like a giant light-bulb went on for people around the world. This is what Jesus would do. This is Jesus’ upside down way.

We hope for Jesus to change the world. We expect Jesus to change the world – no less, I think, than the people he met on the dusty roads of Palestine. And Jesus *does* the change the world ... *in acts of simple humility and love.* Simple acts of humility and love carried out by the people who have received his love. After he had washed their feet, he put his robe back on and

then began to teach. He said, "I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done for you." That you also should bend low to serve another person, that you also should give a gift of love to someone who has nothing to give you in return. This is the way of life that Jesus sets before us; and it is not just a way of service, it is a way of happiness, a way of fulfillment, a pathway to the heart of God.

Serving others, bending low, is a posture that we take in life. It's not just a special day, or a thing we do every now and then. It's an attitude, a perspective – with family, friends, neighbors, strangers, those who work above us, and those who work below us, any person: ready to serve, here to help, no job too large or small. Sometimes pride keeps us from loving others this way. We look and say, that's a job for somebody else; I don't do that, or I don't do that anymore. More often, I think fear and insecurity keep us from loving this way. Will I make a fool of myself, will the other person *accept* my help or my care, and will I be "barging in" if I put myself out there.

Then we see Jesus, who shows us the way. Ready to take on the job no one wants to do. Ready to set aside his ego, and false pride; ready to set aside fear and insecurity, and give himself for others. Ready to bend low, ready to give his life away in love. If we follow Jesus on this downward path, he will turn the world upside down through us. Thanks be to God.

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